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¶ Some Early Episodes in the Life of James McNeill Whistler.

I

TO become really famous it is necessary for a genius to die. Then, having been denied bread during his life, and when recognition is of no avail save to those who are hanging on to the coat tails of his growing fame, he receives the tribute of memorials in bronze and stone. Such was the fate of James McNeill Whistler.

In 1878, evidently having decided, in lieu of an income, to live on the interest of his debts, he commissioned E. W. Godwin, whose widow he afterwards married, to build a house on Tite street, Chelsea, London—the White House, it was called. Less than a year after he moved in, it was sold over his head. When he left, he wrote over the door, “Except the Lord build the house, their labor is but lost that build it.—E. W. Godwin, F. S. A., built this one.” Now, dead less than seven years, he is to have a memorial by Rodin in the very district in which stood the house

from which he was evicted and replicas are to be put up in Paris and in the house of his birth, in Lowell, Mass.

Tardy recognition also is coming to him from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is holding an exhibition of Whistler pictures loaned by their fortunate owners. This recognition is peculiarly appropriate. For, incredible, though it may seem, the now world-famous "Mother" was offered to the Museum for \$500—and declined. Needless to say, the present directorate is not chargeable with this calamity. Eventually the picture was acquired by the French Government and now hangs in the Luxembourg. Had it been bought by the Museum and were it hung there in a room by itself, it might easily become, like the "Sistine Madonna" in Dresden, an object of devout pilgrimage. For its touching simplicity gives it a universal appeal. It is far more than an "Arrangement in Grey and Black—Portrait of the Painter's Mother." It is Motherhood in the twilight of declining years. The sentiment it inspires is one of veneration. It so nearly embodies a religion of motherhood that it could be hung over the altar of any church or chapel dedicated to the memory of a mother



THE LOTUS and not seem out of place.

Upon the Whistler exhibition in the Metropolitan it is impossible to comment here. The exhibition opened too late for that. Nor, perhaps, is comment necessary. His pictures already are in the category of things one takes for granted. Nevertheless, were the portrait of Sir Henry Irving as Philip II of Spain ("Arrangement in Black, No. III") in the exhibition, it would be pleasant to record that, whereas Whistler sold it to Charles Augustus Howell for ten pounds and a sealskin coat, Irving declining to buy it because, as Miss Ellen Terry writes, he did not like the legs, it has since fetched five thousand pounds at auction and is now held at a figure considerably higher.



But while comment on the exhibition is not possible, it has seemed to me that readers of THE LOTUS would be interested in certain early and little known episodes in the life of Whistler. His father was an American army officer who had resigned his commission and become a distinguished civil engineer. As a boy Whistler was abroad with him when he was engaged in railroad construction in Russia. In 1851, when Whistler was seventeen, he was appointed a



cadet in the U. S. Military Academy. At the end of his third year he was dropped for deficiency in the chemistry. Asked on his examination to discuss silicon, he began with this startling definition: "Silicon is a gas." That ended his career at West Point.

Although Whistler never graduated from West Point, the United States Military Academy took pride in his later achievements and a memorial to him, one of Saint-Gaudens' last productions, is in the library there. And to the end of his life Whistler was proud of West Point. He left this country, never to return, in 1855, but he never failed to speak of the U. S. Military Academy in terms of admiration. Thus, our war with Spain was to him "quite the most wonderful, quite the most beautiful war since Louis XIV . . . and all because it was conducted on correct West Point principles, with the most perfect courtesy and dignity on both sides, and with the greatest chivalry."



II

SOME years ago it occurred to me that it might be possible to obtain, before all opportunity of doing so had passed, reminiscences of his three years at

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West Point. Accordingly I secured from the Superintendent of the U. S. Military Academy the names and addresses of army officers who had been Whistler's classmates. Through interviews and correspondence I discovered that Whistler, the cadet, clearly foreshadowed Whistler, the artist. He stood first in the drawing class and his sportive, whimsical mentality was as much in evidence then as it was later in the "Ten o' Clock" or "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies." These factors give importance to the reminiscences of his classmates. In themselves, the incidents to which they relate simply were amusing; in the light of the future, they were prophetic.

General Alexander S. Webb, at the time I interviewed him President of the College of the City of New York, knew Whistler well at West Point. One of the anecdotes he told me illustrates Whistler's quick-wittedness in extricating himself from a disagreeable predicament. There was at West Point at that time, in addition to the regular cadet mess, a private mess for twelve, of whom Whistler was one, at the house of an army officer's widow. One day, according to a preconcerted plan, the first cadet who came to table said, as he sat down, "Good morning,



Mrs. * * *. There is a cat on the roof of your house." The second cadet repeated the remark, except that he varied it by saying, "There are two cats on the roof of your house." Each cadet added a cat until, when Whistler, who was the last to arrive, sat down, he said gravely and with much concern, "Good morning, Mrs. * * *. There are twelve cats on the roof of your house."

At the next meal, Whistler, whom the landlady rightly suspected of having instigated the joke, found under his napkin a billet, notifying him that his presence at the mess was no longer desired. Being, however, averse to returning to the general mess, Whistler hit upon a plan to regain the widow's good will. After dinner he planted himself in front of her husband's portrait, which hung in the parlor, and appeared lost in admiration of it. When he heard the widow entering, he began descanting, as if to himself, yet loud enough for her to hear, upon the virtues of the deceased, winding up by exclaiming, "To think that West Point produced such a man, and that we have his portrait here to remind us of what we ourselves may attain to!" This so touched the widow that Whistler immediately was re-established in her good graces—and the mess.

General Webb also told me that it was not wholly unusual at cavalry drill for Whistler, who was a sorry equestrian, to go sliding over his horse's head. On one such occasion, when he had landed on the tanbark in front of the squad, Major Sackett, who was in command, remarked, as Whistler picked himself up, "Mr. Whistler, I am glad to see you for once at the head of the class."

Major Sackett had succeeded Major (afterwards General) Fitz John Porter. General George D. Ruggles, replying to my inquiries regarding Whistler at West Point, wrote to me that, in the first mounted drill in which Whistler took part, he had a hard horse. Major Porter walked the squad around the hall, then trotted it and then gave the command, "Trot out!"

At this last command Whistler, who had journeyed from the withers of the horse to his croup and back again several times, finally tumbled in a bundle into the tanbark. He lay for a moment without movement. The dragoon soldiers, who imagined him seriously injured, ran to him and picked him up, to carry him to the hospital; but he told them to let him down. Major Porter, who was in command of the instruction, called to him from his horse, "Mr. Whistler, are you hurt?"



Whistler, leisurely drawing off his gauntlet and brushing the tan-bark away from his hips downward, replied, "No, Major! but I do not understand how any man can keep a horse for his own amusement!"

There was in the squad a horse named Quaker. This horse was crazy, as some horses are. He had run away time and again, had thrown the most expert riders in the cavalry detachment, and had hurled one sergeant high in the air, to descend upon the roof of the stable with broken bones and a broken nose. One day, as the cadets took their places in the riding hall, this horse, Quaker, fell to Whistler, who, coming up blinking with his myopia, said, "Dragoon, what horse is this?" The soldier answered, "Quaker, sir;" and Whistler replied, "My God! He's no friend."



I have reserved one of General Webb's reminiscences for the last of the West Point Whistleriana, because it is so eminently characteristic. Cadet Webb and Cadet Whistler occupied adjoining desks in the drawing class. Professor Robert W. Weir was the instructor. One day, while Whistler was busy over an India ink drawing of a French peasant girl, Professor Weir walked, as usual, from desk to desk, ex-

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amining the work of the pupils. After looking over Whistler's shoulder, he stepped back to his own desk, filled his brush with India ink (General Webb said he still could see him rubbing the paint on a plate before "loading") and approached Whistler with a view of correcting some of the lines in the latter's drawing. When Whistler saw him coming, he raised his hands as if to ward off the strokes of the brush and called out, "Oh, don't, sir, don't! You'll spoil it!"

This was dangerously near to insubordination; but Professor Weir merely smiled, and walked back to his desk without making the intended corrections. It must have been about forty-five years after this occurrence in the West Point drawing class that William M. Chase, to whom I told the story, repeated it to Whistler and asked him whether it were true or not. "Well, you know he would have," was Whistler's comment. And so, in his maturity, he indorsed, confirmed and, as it were, topped off an audacity of his youth.



After Whistler was dropped from West Point his family wanted him to secure employment in locomotive works in Baltimore owned by the Winans



family, friends of the Whistlers. But he dexterously eluded this and landed in the drawing department of the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. He received the appointment in November, 1854, and resigned the following February.

From A. Linderkohl, who was a fellow-employee with Whistler and continued in the Survey until his death a few years ago, I learned that Whistler lodged in a house at the north-east corner of E. and Twelfth Streets, a two-story brick building with attic. He occupied a plainly but comfortably furnished room, such as could then have been rented for about ten dollars a month. The office records show that he worked six and one half days in January, and five and three-fourths days in February. He usually arrived late, but he would say, that really it was not his fault. He was not too late, it was the office that opened too early.

Captain Benham, who was then in charge of the office, took occasion to tell Lindenohl that he felt great interest in Whistler, not only on account of his talents, but also on account of his father, who was his particular friend, and added that he would be highly pleased if Lindenohl could induce Whistler to be

THE LOTUS more regular in his attendance. "Call at his lodgings on the way to the office," he said, "and see if you can't bring him along."

"Accordingly, one morning," Lindenohl wrote me, "I called at Whistler's lodgings at half-past eight. No doubt he felt somewhat astonished, but received me with the greatest bonhomie, invited me to make myself at home and promised to make all possible haste to comply with my wishes. Nevertheless he proceeded with the greatest deliberation to rise from his couch and put himself into shape for the street and prepare his breakfast, which consisted of a cup of strong coffee brewed in a steam-tight French machine, then a novelty; and also insisted upon treating me to a cup of coffee. We made no extra haste on our way to the office, which we reached about half-past-ten—an hour and a half after time. I did not repeat the experiment."

Lindenohl describes Whistler as possessed of an elegant figure with an abundance of black curly hair, soft lustrous eyes, finely cut features, fair complexion, well-shaped hands and a graceful tournure. "I thought him about the handsomest fellow I ever met; but for some reasons I did not consider him a per-



fect model of manly beauty—his mouth betokened more ease than firmness, his brow more reserve than acute mental activity, and his eyes more depth than penetration. Sensitiveness and animation appeared to be his predominating traits."

In addition to the material of the West Point and Coast Survey days which they obtained from me and of which they made due and courteous acknowledgement, the Pennells, in writing their fine Whistler biography, secured from Whistler himself a delightful anecdote relating to his employment in the Survey. Captain Benham used to come and look through the small magnifying glass each draughtsman in this department had to work with. One day, Whistler etched a little devil on the glass, and Captain Benham looked through it at the plate. Whistler, at the moment, was lying full length on a sort of mattress or trestle, so as not to touch the copper. But he saw Captain Benham give a jump.

The Captain said nothing, however. He pocketed the glass, and that was all Whistler heard of it until many years afterwards when, one day, an old gentleman appeared at his studio in Paris, and by way of introduction took from his watch-chain a tiny magni-

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fying glass, and asked Whistler to look through it—“and,” said Whistler “well—we recognized each other perfectly.”

My letter to the Coast Survey led not only to my correspondence with Mr. Lindenohl, but also to a thorough search of the office for work done by Whistler. This resulted in the discovery of a plate on which he had etched a view of the Eastern extremity of Anacapa Island in Santa Barbara Channel. For pictorial effect he added two flights of birds. The plate is now in the Congressional Library. Previous to this he had etched on a trial plate two coast scenes and some fanciful figure sketches.

The two plates are Whistler's first known etchings. Thus, his “Well, you know, he would have,” to Chase, the incident of the magnifying glass in Paris, and the discovery of one of his earliest etched plates, as a result of my search for information, seem palpable links between his age and his youth and lift what otherwise might be amusing anecdote to the level of prophetic characterization.

“If silicon had been a gas,” said Whistler, many years after leaving West Point, “I would be a Major General.”

How clever of silicon not to have been a gas!